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ABSTRACT

Estimates of the number of children currently missing in the United States are only approximate because there is no effective central data bank to collect information on missing persons and unidentified bodies. However, the problem appears to have reached epidemic proportions. Some parents of missing persons have formed organizations in different parts of the country to advise other parents with missing children of measures that might prove effective in finding their child and to educate the public about the many problems and frustrations these families encounter. The police and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), although sympathetic, are often powerless in abduction cases. After several incidences of confusion and misinformation by the police and FBI about jurisdictional authority, the aunt of a missing child organized a volunteer program to press for a central communication network that could prove invaluable in cases with similar details by matching information to identify bodies or lead police to a single offender. If parents of a missing child have filed a full description of their children with the schools, the description could be forwarded in chain-letter fashion to local hospitals, hospitals across the country, and eventually into a central data bank. Federal legislation for this costly, but very feasible network is pending. (HTH)

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They Remember the "Lost" People

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THEY REMEMBER THE "LOST" PEOPLE

The murders of black children in Atlanta over the past year have shocked the nation and made it aware of a tragedy--the missing child. Yet, while attention is on Atlanta, the problem of missing children throughout the country continues unnoticed and virtually unpublicized. These "unnoticed" ones are missing children whose parent have spent money they cannot afford once the police have stopped their searches on their own publicity campaigns, private investigators and even psychics.

John Clinkscales of LaGrange, Georgia, 70 miles southwest of Atlanta, whose 22-year-old son disappeared five years ago and has never been found wrote, "To solely focus on such as the Atlanta cases is like medically treating the symptom rather than the disease. The disease is missing persons, the lack of awareness of the general public, and the general attitude of many of the law enforcement agencies. When there are no more victims to be found in Atlanta, when the news value dies down, when the special task force is disbanded, when the FBI and GBI (Georgia Bureau of Investigation) agents go to other assignments the problem will still be with us."

Estimates are that 50,000 to 60,000 children are currently missing and that 12,000 bodies have been found. These figures are only approximate. No one knows exact figures. There is not a coherent,

effective central date bank that collects information on missing persons and unidentified bodies. The National Crime Information Center operates a computer bank for missing persons, but the missing person must meet four criteria before being entered into the computer. Police departments throughout the country, which have the sole authority of entering a missing person's name into this computer, are frequently confused or misinformed as to its purpose. Thus, the names it holds does not represent an accurate number of missing persons.

Some parents of missing persons have formed organizations in different parts of the country to advise parents of missing children of measures that may prove effective in finding their child. The founders also hope to educate the public through their organizations of the many problems and frustrations families of missing persons encounter. Those organizations keep in touch with one another to share information, exchange ideas and collect statistics on the problem of children who are labeled "lost" by the police.

Some parents are bitter toward the police. In fact, the police are sympathetic, but at the same time, powerless after their searches have proved futile. The FBI, too, is powerless, even though kidnapping is a federal offense. According to federal regulations, the FBI can become involved in a kidnapping case only when there is concrete evidene of abduction, such as a ransom note or when evidence shows a person was forcibly taken across state lines. But, not all kidnappers are interested in ransom money. Some kidnappers sell children for pornographic, prostitution or drug-related purposes. Illegal adoption

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rings are also a market for stolen children. And proving a person was forcibly taken across state lines is difficult for private investigators to do, let alone parents.

On the morning of May 25, 1979, 6-year-old Etan Patz left his home in the Greenwich Village area of Manhattan. Etan was to walk two blocks to catch a bus to school, but he never arrived in school that day. After checking out 2,500 leads, the police were able to firmly trace Etan's path for only one of those two blocks. The leads have long since stopped, and the search parties have long since been disbanded. The Patzes have been left without police assistance in the search for their son. The Patzes are not alone.

If a typical child disappearance case could be described, it would be that of 12-year-old Dee Scofield of Ocala, Florida. Dee's case typifies the bureaucratic red tape and frustration that families of missing children face.

Dee Scofield disappeared from an Ocala shopping center July 22, 197 Her family has not seen her since. Dee was with her mother at the shopping center's Florida Highway Patrol Office, where her mother had gone to take a driver's license test. With her mother's permission, Dee went shopping in a store in the center while her mother took the test. The two were to meet afterwards. Dee never reappeared.

One valid sighting of Dee with a man was made near the entrance to the Ocala National Forest about an hour after she disappeared. The police did not learn of the report until 24 hours after it had been made. In Ocala, at that time, police waited 24 hours before searching for missing

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persons, even missing children.

The Ocala Police Department issued an all points bulletin. During the two weeks following Dee's abduction, there were indications that Dee might have been held captive by a man just outside Tampa. Relatives asked the Tampa Police Department and the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Department to check into this lead. Both departments claimed to have received no record of an APB.

Similar incidences of confusion and misinformation by the police and FBI along with replies of "jurisdictional authority" as to why various law agencies could not get involved plagued the Scofields in the crucial months after Dee's disappearance--months when clues were still promising.

In September 1976, Dee's aunt, Betty DiNova, started the Dee Scofield Awareness Program. "It's a volunteer organization set up as an awareness program--to get the story in front of the public," she said.

"We want a central agency to search for these kids," she said. A central data bank carrying a description of missing children along with unidentified bodies is needed. "When a body is found, then, we could go into the computer and match it up with the missing person's report filed on it," she added.

In order to arouse public awareness and support, DiNova started the annual Dee Scofield Day in 1978. On July 22 of each year--the anniversary of the day on which Dee disappeared--DiNova attempts to gain media attention for the cause of missing children. In 1978 she sent a news release explaining the significance of July 22 along with

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brochures to 157 newspapers, 16 TV and 45 radio stations. The media response: three known newspaper articles; two taped and two live radio interviews; one taped TV interview; and promises from other newspapers, TV and radio stations. Although media response was not overwhelming, DiNova received six letters from parents of missing or troubled children. The letters came not only from Florida but also from Kentucky, Ohio and Virginia.

DiNova also freelances on the plight of missing children and their families. Furthermore, she collects newspaper clippings on missing children, compiling the information into statistical data. She calls the matter a "national disgrace"; her statistics prove her point. One of her findings showed that of 417 child disappearance cases in 36 states as of January 13, 1981, 132 cases involved murder, rape or both. What is startling is that only 26 offenders were involved in those crimes.

Like DiNova, June Vlasaty of Newport, Rhode Island, also collects newspaper clippings and statistics on missing children. Vlasaty was the first to form such an organization--the Society for Young Victims in 1975. Unlike the others, Vlasaty is not a parent of a missing child. She conducts private investigation work on her own into missing children cases.

"We started out with about 200 members in the Society. We're down to about four. People lose interest," she said. She became interested in missing children as a member of a search and rescue team for a local radio station.

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"After searching for eight days in the woods for a 5-year-old boy and finding nothing, I couldn't get it out of my mind. I wanted to continue. I couldn't give it up," she said. As a result, Vlasaty founded the Society.

She said a central information bank could prove invaluable in cases with similar details. The information could be compiled and entered into the computer. Although the human mind could never store and interpret countless details, the computer's memory could. Possibly, details could be matched on similar cases, leading police to a single offender, she said. "Dental charts and X-rays of missing children should be stored in the clearinghouse until these children are found dead or alive," she added. This information would aid in identification

Vlasaty described the attitude of the police as a "mess". And, "the FBI won't get involved unless there's a ransom note or unless you know someone--a politician. An FBI agent told me that. I told the FBI that any time I hear of a missing child, I'm going to send a ransom note to the parents," she said.

"It's sad, but it's got to happen to a policeman's or a judge's child before something gets done," she added.

"The public has to know and must know. The public is unaware until it's a damn horror show like the Gacy case," she said. (John Wayne Gacy of Illinois was found guilty on March 12, 1980 of murdering 33 young men and boys and of two sex charges. Gacy buried 29 bodies on his property and disposed of the other four in Illinois rivers.)

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"Our children have to be frightened. It is more psychologically damaging to them to bury their friends," she added.

Vlasaty suggested that a syndicated column be started on how to educate children and teach them the trickery used to pick them up. "It should be more read than 'Dear Abby'," she said.

She also recommended that parents file a full description of their children, updated yearly, with the school they attend. Within hours after a child's disappearance, the description should be sent to hospitals in the area. These hospitals should send it on in a chain-letter fashion to all hospitals across the country, she added.

Vlasaty cited a California case in which a child was injured badly and needed blood transfusions after falling off a skateboard. A man claiming to be the child's father volunteered to donate blood. When the blood types did not match, hospital officials checked their missing persons files and discovered that the child fit a description of a missing boy.

Gloria Yerkovich's daughter has been missing for seven years. Yerkovich, of New York City and founder of Child Find, Inc., also believes that schools can be of primary importance in the recovery of missing children.

"We've been working since May. We are forming a communication channel so that parents and children who are separated from each other can find one another," she said.

Yerkovich's "channel" is a computer in which, for instance, parents of missing children and children who believe they have been

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kidnapped can register in the hopes that the two can be matched up.

"We've designed a poster. It's going to be sent to elementary school libraries," she said. The poster explains to children the procedures for registering with the computer. It is being tested in 3,000 to 4,000 schools in the Hudson Valley area within a 100-mile radius," she said.

Yerkovich cited the Steven Stayner case in California. Steven disappeared when he was 7 years old. Seven years later when the same man that snatched him, took another boy, Steven hitchhiked with the little boy to a police station.

"If there were a computer system in the school Steven was attending he could have had a chance. These children are restrained by fear, a sense of helplessness and even by the sense of authority elders have over them," she said. The startling detail of the Stayner case was that the boy was only 200 miles from home.

Yerkovich hopes to make the computer functional on an international scale. She has already been contacted by a man in India who has not seen his daughter for six years. This man claims to know approximately where in California his daughter is, according to Yerkovich.

Many involved in missing persons organizations consider John Clinkscales and his wife, Louise, who together founded Find-Me, Inc. after their son Kyle disappeared, to be experts in what they call "the missing persons phenomenon." The couple is also looked upon as leaders in the fight for missing persons rights.

John Clinkscales has written a book titled "Kyle's Story: Friday Never Came." It was printed in a May 15, 1979 special edition of the

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LaGrange Daily News "in the hope that it will inspire national publicity concerning a very serious and real problem for many parents, husbands or wives--that of missing persons," according to Glen O. Long, publisher.

In it Clinkscales describes how he and his wife have worked as private detectives in the search for their son--how they have devoted all their available energy and resources to unravel Kyle's disappearance. He estimated that they have spent more than $1,000 just for postage in the search for their son. "In fact," he wrote, "we have spent more than an average of $100 per month since he disappeared in searching for him."

Printing 5,000 bumper stickers with the message "WHAT HAPPENED TO KYLE CLINKSCALES DRIVING A 1974 PINTO WITH GEORGIA TAG CEF-717? MURDERED? AMNESIA? MISSING? $2,000 FOR INFORMATION. CALL 404-884-461 was one of the many publicity measures the couple undertook. Being field directors of the National Campers and Hikers Association, the largest camping organization in the world, the couple was able to obtain a listing of the other 1,500 field directors across the country. The Clinkscales mailed a sticker along with a note to each. They mailed several hundred more to Boy Scouts in Buffalo, New York, who learned of the campaign and wanted to help.

As a result of the bumper stickers, coverage was received in the Buffalo (New York) Evening News, the Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle, the Montgomery (Alabama) Advertiser, the Atlanta (Georgia)

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Journal, the Colorado Springs (Colorado) Gazette-Telegraph, the Associated Press, Atlanta's WSB-TV and several camping magazines.

The couple has also turned to psychics in their search. One California psychic determined that Kyle was murdered and buried near a farmhouse in a certain area of Texas. The Clinkscales gave the information to the GBI who contacted the sheriff of Hill County, Texas. A farmhouse was found meeting the psychic's description along with two or three more resembling it. The Clinkscales had the entire area searched for several days. Even infrared photography equipment was used from the air. This equipment would have revealed a body had it been buried within the photographed area. Nothing was found.

Like the others involved in missing persons organizations, the Clinkscales also believe that a nationwide computer bank would be a vital tool in determining the fate of missing persons. "Eight months after my son disappeared, a body virtually meeting his description was found 55 miles from here. Our sheriff didn't even know about it," he said. If a computer bank were in existence, the description of the Clinkscales boy and the body could have been matched up.

This problem of identifying bodies achieved national attention in 1976 when DeKalk County, Illinois, police found the body of a badly decomposed homicide victim. Even fingerprints could not be salvaged. The victim, though, was determined to be a 19- to 23-year-old female.

The department had her skull reconstructed by the Federal Aviation Administration in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, according to Capt. James Laben. The reconstruction was published in detective magazines, but

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no one claimed her. Because she had a distinctive dental pattern, the department had it printed in the American Dental Association's journal. Still, she remained unidentified. After keeping the body in storage for almost one year in the hope that someone would positively identify her, the city and community buried the girl as a Jane Doe. The grave site and burial fee was donated by the owners of the cemetery.

Clinkscales also noted the uninvolvement of the FBI in missing persons cases. In order to have my son's name registered as missing on a national basis, "I had to report to the National Crime Information Center that my car was stolen and was last seen driven by my son," he said. The NCIC operates a computer bank for stolen automobiles. Ironically, if the Clinkscales boy is found alive, he would be arrested for automobile theft.

Both Clinkscales and DiNova mentioned a "kidnapping" in which the FBI made an exception and became involved even though a ransom note was not found. "A mare in foal to the famed racehorse Secretariat was reported missing in Kentucky. The FBI located it in the same state. A man had found it wandering near his home and had provided food and shelter, unaware of its $500,000 price tag. The FBI told the press it had entered the case 'because of the value of the horse'," DiNova wrote in an article for Central Florida Scene.

Chicago is one of several cities across the country to have a computer bank storing information on missing persons within Chicago city limits, according to Lt. Bill Alexander, a spokesman for the Chicago Police Department. The computer was developed after the Gacy

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case by police officers within the department. All the information the Chicago Police Department had on file for missing persons was entered into this computer.

Alexander described the computer as "an extension in logic." "It gives an officer the benefit of others' knowledge of a missing person and of all documented information generated about the person," he said.

Alexander also noted the financial and manpower limitations police departments face in missing persons cases.

For instance, a typical case of a missing child under 12 years old would generate a "crescendo of activity," according to Alexander. A police officer and a supervisor would respond immediately to the scene where they would assess the situation, writing up a case report. A description of the missing child would then be broadcast across various radio frequencies, Alexander said.

The police officer would then teletype the case report to the district station so that other stations throughout the city would be made aware of the missing child. The sergeant would remain on the scene with the parents, finding out further information on the child. If something irregular is suspected about the case or if time extends, a prearranged number of officers would start a systematic search of the neighborhood. According to Alexander, after a few hours, the lieutenant would be notified and would put a bigger search into action. Police officers from other districts would be used so that a couple hundred uniformed policemen would be searching for the child.

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If the searches prove futile, if all leads have been checked into and if no kidnap demands are made, the department would stop looking for the child. "We don't have enough assets or manpower," Alexander said. All that was done in searching for the missing child up to this point cost $25,000, he added.

Alexander described a national computer bank storing information on missing persons and unidentified bodies as "feasible, totally workable" but costly.

Rep. Paul Simon of Illinois is sponsoring a bill that would establish this "totally workable" idea. The organizations for missing persons are pushing for the legislation.

"We are going to chart out a unified effort to get the involvement of the Congressional people," said John Clinkscales.

These people do not give up. They do not forget.

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